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INFO RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 9381
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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2008

In Today's Papers

"Israel Strikes While the World Sits Back and Watches" (Zaman)
Media are completely consumed by the story of the growing crisis between Israel and Hamas. Media outlets carry screaming headlines describing a humanitarian crisis in Gaza as Israel continues its strikes. In a rare moment, Islamists and secularists are united in their opinions as they harshly criticize the Israeli strikes. Islamist-oriented Zaman carries the headline, "Doctors Are Performing Surgery by the Lights of Their Cell Phones," as "The effects of the bombs are causing Palestinian doctors to shake." Liberal Radikal carries the headline, "All-out Brutality against Palestine," as Cengiz Candar calls the situation, "a bloodbath." Mainstream Milliyet carries the headline, "Gaza Weeps for Its Children," as "Israel prepares for all out war," including, "invasion and destruction." Mainstream Sabah reports, "Dead Children Will Not Grow Up," next to photos of the four sisters killed by an Israeli rocket while they slept. Mainstream Hurriyet carries the front-page banner headlines, "Once Again, Children Are the Victims," and "Doctors Perform Surgery by the Lights of Their Mobile Phones," in Gaza while Israeli rockets continue to bombard the area. Extreme right Tercuman reports, "Israel's Bloody Operation in Gaza Turns into Mass Murder."

In a related story, mainstream Sabah reports Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan will embark on a tour of Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in order to "carry an important message to the world" for peace in the Middle East. Mainstream Hurriyet calls the tour "Erdogan's Peace Tour." In fact, all papers paint the PM as a peacemaker in search of an emergency ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Papers report the AKP Deputy Murat Mercan, AKP Deputy Nursuna Memecan and MHP Deputy Mehmet Sandir have resigned from the Turkey-Israel parliamentary friendship group in protest of the Israeli attacks. Sandir said in his resignation, "I cannot be a friend to a country that kills children and women." Meanwhile, on Monday Foreign Minister Ali Babacan held a joint press conference with visiting Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit. During the press event, the two foreign ministers urged Israel to stop its deadly offensive in the Gaza Strip. Babacan said the indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria through Turkey's mediation had become

"impossible" after the onslaught in Gaza.

"Gaza Is Dying in Agony," and "The World Remains Silent" (Cumhuriyet)

Media outlets note Western countries, including the U.S., have stopped short of condemning Israel's operations into Gaza. Leftist nationalist Cumhuriyet reports, "Western countries are not joining Arab countries in their criticism of Israel," and instead, "the West is defending Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas," during Israel's "bloody operations in Gaza." Islamist-oriented Zaman carries the headline, "Israel Is Attacking Gaza with American Bombs." Conservative-nationalist Turkiye reports, "Who Will Stop Israel? Only the U.S. Can End the Tragedy in the Middle East," and that is only, "If Obama Wants To."

Editorial Commentary on Israel's Gaza Attacks

Columnist Mehmet Yilmaz from mainstream Hurriyet and Taha Akyol of Milliyet find PM Erdogan's strong rhetoric against Israel "harsh and dangerous" because of the potential political and foreign policy consequences.

Liberal Radikal's Murat Yetkin praises the PM for "not trying to justify Hamas' actions and focusing only on the Israeli attack in Gaza."

Milliyet's Fikret Bila thinks PM Erdogan's harsh reaction to Israel stems from "feelings of humiliation after being deceived by Israel."

Bila notes, "Last week Olmert promised Erdogan there would be no humanitarian crisis in Palestine; at the same time Israel was

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preparing to launch this operation." In addition, Bila points out, "This attack has destroyed the Syria/Israel peace talks that were mediated by Turkey. This development will weaken the power of Turkey and Arab countries in the region."

Columnist Erdal Safak in mainstream Sabah recommends that PM Erdogan's Chief Foreign Policy Adviser Davutoglu should immediately go to Damascus and "make sure to engage Hamas leader Mashal" arguing that, given the current climate, "this is the right time to make this effort."

Meanwhile, Mustafa Balbay in leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet as well as Fehmi Koru in Islamist oriented Yeni Safak agree on one thing - the timing of Israeli attack is not a coincidence. Balbay says, "The Israeli government wants to bring a fait-accompli to the next US administration." Koru says, "Israel is trying to make the Middle East problem an immediate priority for the Obama administration, and divert Washington's attention from Iraq and Afghanistan."

Iranian Explosives in Mersin

Mainstreams Hurriyet and Milliyet report that Mersin Customs officials decided to inspect 22 shipping containers that were en route from Iran to Venezuela. The customs officials suspected the presence of radioactive material, so experts from the Atomic Energy Institute were called in to inspect the containers. The AEI inspectors subsequently found explosive materials made of nitrate and sulfite. Official documents on the containers claimed that the containers contained tractor parts. Currently, the containers remain in the custody of Mersin Customs Officials in the Mersin harbor.

TRT to Launch Kurdish Broadcasts January 1

Media outlets report the state-owned TRT television will launch Kurdish-language broadcasts starting on January 1, and Prime Minister Erdogan will deliver a speech in Kurdish on the new channel, TRT-6. Papers expect Erdogan to issue messages against ethnic discrimination. At the end of his speech, Erdogan will congratulate the new channel and send New Years greetings. Conservative-Islamist papers see Kurdish-language broadcasting on state-owned television as a milestone in the democratic initiatives made with regard to the Kurdish question in Turkey. Islamist-oriented Zaman writes, "The Prime Minister breaks a taboo and speaks Kurdish." Liberal Radikal carries the headline, "Erdogan Salutes the Kurdish Language on TRT." Meanwhile, leftist Taraf is

less salutary toward the PM in "Erdogan Utters Words in Kurdish during an Interview with The Kurdish Station."

TV News:
CNN Turk

Domestic News

- The prosecutor ordered the arrest of 15 al-Qaeda suspects taken into custody last week in Istanbul.
- Professor Yunus Soylet has been appointed the Rector of Istanbul University by President Abdullah Gul. Soylet, a supporter of headscarf freedom in universities, was the family doctor of PM Erdogan.
- Industrial employment drops by 1.4 percent in the third quarter of the year, while employment in construction drops by 6.8 percent.

International News

- Iran's state news agency IRNA reports rebels from Iran's ethnic Baluchi minority have killed four members of the security forces in southeastern Iran.

- The UN-backed Mine Action Centre (MAC) says a four-year project to

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clear landmines from a buffer zone in Cyprus could end next month due to a lack of funds.

- Bangladesh voted in its first election in seven years, in a poll anticipated to restore democracy to this troubled nation after two years of emergency rule.

JEFFREY